



UNDER DEVELOPMENT

A holiday should be a time to relax, reflect and disconnect from the trials and tribulations of the workplace – but not so for David Robinson, who has to find a way to keep in touch while he's away from a permanent internet connection

I'm off to France for my annual five-week holiday in a few days. As always, I shall take some work with me in the vain hope that, uninterrupted by custards, I can actually make some progress.

However, as my grandson and newly arrived grand-daughter will also be with us for a while, I can foresee many diversions for my time.

Various kind readers have contacted me over the past year with tales of how to get a usable mobile internet connection in France, but I've

chickened out and settled for redirecting all my emails to a Yahoo! box and attending to them using the dreaded slot machine in the bar – unless I can find an open WiFi point.

As a case in point, reader Grant Mangham sent me a message in June from his PDA linked to a WAP/GPRS phone dialling into freesurf.fr, telling me how well it's working. I replied straight away. Over a month later, I got a message from him asking if I received his earlier message, so it's hardly what you could call reliable.

Personally, if I can't trust a method of communication to work then I'm not going to use it unless there's absolutely no other way. Has anybody had any success with satellite internet? Is there a portable version?

Anyway, as I'm spending the week tidying up loose ends before departing, I'll do the same here and try and finalise a few issues.

BT CALL COSTS

Reader Roy Read emailed me to help clear up the reason why BT, in its

international charges list, has an entry for calls to the UK costing £1.1508 per minute. He thinks that this is what it costs when you use a BT charge card from abroad. He's got one and says that's what it costs him to call from Germany.

I'd be surprised if all calls from everywhere using a charge card cost the same, but then I'm taken by surprise all the time so that would be nothing new. Any further enlightenment on this issue would be gratefully received.

BATPHONE UPDATE

While we're on the subject, the Batphone – my Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) connection using Skype and a proper VoIP phone – continues in daily use (see the feature on page 209 for more about VoIP services). We have several clients at home and overseas using these things, and they've saved us a fortune. At first I regretted leaving one in the USA because, as the calls cost nothing, the clients felt that they could call me morning, noon and night about the tiniest things rather than think them through for themselves. The novelty's worn off now, though, and they're just using it for normal support and discussion of new business issues.



The only difficulty I sometimes have is not with the phone service itself but the fact that my laptop has quite a complex sound setup, which can leave the volume control on the sound input turned right down. In addition to the built-in sound card, there's the Skype phone itself, which counts as a sound I/O device. I also have an external USB MIDI device plus an Edirol UA-3 (which is brilliant and much better quality than the built-in rubbish) for sound recording and manipulation. If I've been using the Edirol, Windows can get confused and when people call me I can hear them but they can't hear me. So I have to remember to check and reset the audio settings every time I have been using the Edirol for recording or playback monitoring, which I can assure you is not an easy task.

I've also installed the Skype software on my Fujitsu Loox Pocket PC, which has built-in WiFi networking. When I'm within range of a WiFi router the PDA works just like a phone and the sound quality is good, too. The only slightly confusing bit is that the microphone input is at the top of the PDA and the speaker is at the bottom so I have to remember to hold it upside down when Skyping.

Another nice aspect of Skype is that for a few euros a month you can have a US phone number linked to your Skype service so that when somebody calls that number your Skype phone rings, wherever you are. You can appear to have offices anywhere in the world for very little. This allows you to say to a prospective custard, "I'm going to be away next week but you can contact me on my New York number." Which is not exactly a lie, but it does convey a rather inaccurate impression.

You'll never be able to trust me again, will you?

SAGE ADVICE

I'm grateful to reader Carne Webb, who has also seen instances of the strange date-reversal problem I described in *Shopper* August 2005. If you didn't see that, or have a memory as bad as mine, this occurred when I used Sage MMS accounting software in the USA. Dates entered in the standard American way (mm/dd/yyyy) were getting automatically converted into dd/mm/yyyy but only for dates that could legitimately be reversed. For example, if you were entering a payment dated 8th April 2005 (04/08/2005 in US terms) that was changed to 08/04/2005, which is 4th August. If you try doing that in April, the application thinks it is 'illegal' so it won't let you complete the payment. If the date can't be reversed (for example 04/13/2005), the

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I've spent a disproportionate amount of my time recently chasing a client who's trying to migrate from an old version of one of our software packages to a new one. They've been going round in circles for over a month. Every week I visit and leave a list of things to do and by the next week, if I'm lucky, they've achieved 10 per cent of it. A lot of effort goes into completing very little. There's no focus on what's important and what's not so everybody involved gets very frustrated.

program left the date alone. The upshot was that you couldn't pay suppliers before the middle of the month, which was inconvenient to say the very least.

Carne has seen this behaviour in several MS Office applications going back as far as 1997 and is working with one now where Excel has the same annoying trait. He's having to get round it by forcing dates to be

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stored as text information then tweaking his SQL scripts to allow for that more cumbersome form of storage. It's annoying because extra code such as that costs more development time and adds to the risk of introducing unwanted bugs in your own code.

The cause looks like a bug (but for legal reasons we'll call it an undocumented feature) that's buried deep inside one of the Microsoft language libraries and is triggered only in certain circumstances.

I know that Sage uses both MS C++ and VB in the development of its applications so, until I discover otherwise, I'll treat that as the explanation. It looks as if my Sage mole's explanation that the strange date behaviour was something to do with online banking compatibility was bunkum.



To try and help them out, I'll be sending them a copy of Sally McGhee's *Take Back Your Life*. They use Outlook, and the book is about using Outlook to get organised. You might think that any fool can use Outlook, but this isn't just about the features you'll find

in the program. It examines the thought processes and actions you need to get organised, and uses Outlook as one of the means of getting there. For instance, there's a short but very useful section on dealing with interruptions, a major reason why people get nothing done.

There's a CD inside the back cover. I'd rather the publishers had got rid of the CD and charged a fiver less for the book, but that's Microsoft for you. If you're feeling flush or are really disorganised and determined to reform your ways, you should also look at www.skillpath.co.uk. Its Managing Multiple Projects, Objectives and Deadlines seminar costs £116 per person and is well worth it. Think of it as taking time to save time.

PALM SOFTWARE

I continue to use the Palm Zire and now have several custom programs running on it. These are much more convenient when on the move than using a laptop as the platform. However, I'm finding it hard to break the habit of using my pencil and paper organiser, especially as the Zire disappeared for a week, eventually turning up buried in a pile of

Whoopee! An app that's well written, useful (if you travel a lot) and can be used on a small, portable platform. Oh yes, and it passes the Yorkshireman's hardest test – it costs nowt.

WHAT A WASTE

Just as I'm about to leave, a fax arrives from customer Brian. He's seen a news item saying that in future you won't be able to dispose of old computers. What are we going to do about it? "We"? How come it's my responsibility?

After some brief research, I discover it boils down to a directive on Waste Acceptance Criteria that says you can't put CRT screens and electronics kit into a landfill site any more. A Google search didn't find much other than people offering to recycle equipment in exchange for a great deal of money. It appears that you have to dispose of electronics equipment at authorised sites, a bit like fridges with their nasty gases. But that means we have to get our stuff past the Sultan of the Skip – the vicious guardian of our local tip. And he's very eagle-eyed when it comes to commercial enterprises using his site.

We have learned from past experience that Mrs R has the best chance of getting through. While he gives us guys a hard time the Sultan is always keen to help out the ladies. Alan suggested we test things out and send her down there with a couple of old screens to recycle, then 'monitor' the results. ☹

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